
Dr. Antonio Scarpa

Dr. Antonio Scarpa Talks About Becoming CSR's New Director

After Dr. Scarpa agreed to become the new Director of the NIH Center for Scientific Review (CSR), he answered a few questions asked by CSR's Communications Director, Don Luckett.

Why did you take the job?

I've been the chair of the physiology and biophysics department at Case Western Reserve for 18 years. I could've done it for a few more, but this new job is a great opportunity to do something on the national level to help the biomedical community. It may sound trite, but I believe it. Maybe it comes from growing up in another country and finding enormous opportunities in this one. For the last 30 years or so, my lab was funded at the rate of one to two million dollars a year, and I feel like I should pay back.

But it's not just a sense of duty, I'm excited about leading the world's premier scientific review organization. The NIH peer review system is the glory of this country, and everybody wants to imitate us. In a way, taxpayers and Congress give us a great trust, allowing scientists to judge the research applications of their peers. It's a unique privilege, and I think our job is not only to ensure that its image isn't tarnished but to make it better. This work is so important, because our reviews help NIH identify research that holds the most promise for curing and preventing disease. I thus feel honored to be coming to NIH.

How will you work with the scientific community?

I've been an officer and member of a number of major scientific societies. For instance, I served on the board of the Association of American Medical Colleges for six years, led the Federation of American Societies for Experimental Biology board for 2 years, and served as the treasurer of the Biophysical Society for five years. I thus have a deep understanding of the scientific and academic communities, and I will feel quite comfortable going around and asking for their opinions. I know that even the brightest idea for improving the system is not going to work unless the scientific community buys into it.

How would you make the NIH peer review system better?

I've served on peer review committees at NIH and the American Heart Association for nearly 20 years, and I have seen what works well and what works less well. But I know I have a lot to learn about CSR, NIH and the government. I'm sure I'll be surprised when I

get to work. There's a lot of information and data I don't have now, and as a scientist, I want to have as much data as I can to see what changes are needed and which ones are possible. I also want to learn from other peer-review systems and the many people familiar with them.

What are the first things you plan to do when you get to CSR?

I don't want to make decisions in a vacuum. Before I come onboard in July, I plan to be there about once a week to talk to as many people as possible, including other NIH Institute and Center Directors and their extramural staff. I'll be navigating what are for me uncharted waters, so instead of charting a course by myself, it will be helpful to learn from others who already know what I need to know. This approach has worked very well for me in the past.

How would you describe your management style?

When I became chair of the physiology and biophysics department at Case 18 years ago, I was not prepared to be a manager. It was good that it only had five faculty members. As I recruited new members, we grew up little by little. I started off as a perfectionist and a micromanager, but I soon realized you can't do everything yourself. You have to delegate, and doing so energizes people. I'm also sold on management that heavily involves participatory action at different levels. I'm a believer in transparency and having an open door to anyone. In fact, my current office doesn't have a door, and I hope to keep an open door policy at CSR. I also believe in management by walking around and interacting with everyone from the cleaners to the dean and president. CSR staff can expect all of this. Most of them, I assume, will like it, since this approach has worked so well at Case, where we developed a department that now has over 40 faculty members and is ranked among the top 5 percent of the physiology and biophysics departments in the country.

Can you describe the evolution of your own scientific interests?

There are some scientists who start and die studying one protein. But I've been impatient and liked to explore different things, so I've changed fields every five to six years. It may sound risky, but a broad understanding can lead to broad advances, particularly when you bring new tools and know-how to your new research areas. My whole career has been marked by advances into new territories. In Padua, Italy, I was trained as an M.D. and a surgeon and studied general pathology. I then studied a little thermodynamics in Israel, lipid chemistry in Holland, and bioenergetics in England before settling at the University of Pennsylvania. There, I studied secretion and muscle contractility and I also worked on instrumentation and imaging. In addition, I developed some indicators for measuring calcium and magnesium. At Case I did pretty much the same, leaving individual projects to postdocs and assistant professors as I moved to new areas. Looking back, I see it was good training for my new job at CSR, which is constantly adjusting to shifting scientific boundaries.

Are you related to the Antonio Scarpa who was one of the most noted physicians in the 18th century?

I'm not sure, because the records were lost after three or four generations and Scarpa is a very common Venetian name. My father was a surgeon in Padua and then in Venice, and for at least a couple of generations before, my forefathers were surgeons. With such a family and tradition, I felt like I didn't have any choice but to be a surgeon. However, I wasn't raised feeling trapped by tradition. I grew up in Padua and Venice at a special time. Venice was not like Disney World as it is now. It was a real city, and you could not fail but develop a lot of love for art, beauty, and the people there.

The Center for Scientific Review organizes the peer review groups that evaluate the majority of grant applications submitted to the National Institutes of Health. CSR also receives all NIH and many Public Health Service grant applications and assigns them to the appropriate NIH Institutes and Centers and PHS agencies. Additional information on CSR is available on our Web site (http://www.csr.nih.gov) or by calling 301 435-1111.